



The Mahon family

One of the UK's leading Jersey herds is set to be sold and a top position in the NMR annual production rankings means it's going out on a high note.



Herd size:	57
Average yield:	7,932kg
Average classification:	82.7 points
Sale date:	November 1, 2013

One of the UK's best Jersey herds is to be sold later this year

Going out on a high

Balanced breeding and consistent management has kept one Norfolk-based Jersey herd at the top of the NMR annual production rankings for many years. But, after 58 years, the Mahons are set to sell the herd this autumn.

text **Rachael Porter**

Occupying second place in NMR's 2013 national annual production rankings for the Jersey breed means a lot to the owners of the Seething-based 57-cow pedigree Upgate herd. Not least because Frank and Su Mahon and their daughter Louise Edwards are set to disperse their renowned herd later this year.

"It's good to go out on a high, particularly after such a tough year," says Su, who has mixed feelings about the herd sale. She and husband Frank will stay on at the family farm, semi-retired, while Louise, who lives less than two miles away, will use the farm buildings and a proportion of the unit's 65 hectares to rear and sell freshly calved heifers, by using sexed semen.

Balanced cows

"We'll just keep around 20 heifers to breed from – enough to keep us busy and to provide an income," explains Su. "We think the remaining land will be share farmed, but we've yet to finalise that. But the herd sale is

definitely going ahead on November 1. It'll be sad to see the girls go, but after 58 years of dairying it's time we had a rest." Herd size was reduced from 120 head five years ago. Again it was proving a little too much, with Su and Frank nearing retirement and Louise with a young family to look after.

But life was far from easy in 2012. Frank's health isn't what it used to be – he has arthritis – and the family had a bad winter following a terrible summer, just as many producers experienced in 2012. "The cows were in and out throughout the summer. Grazing conditions were awful, but we made enough forage to get us through the winter," he says. "My poor health is the main reason we're selling up."

The Mahons have always strived to breed balanced cows with longevity, as well as production with high butterfat and protein.

Milk yield for the herd is currently running at 7,932kg with a fat-and-protein yield of 741kg. Milk is sold, on a Channel Island contract to London-based Freshways and then onto several dairies on different days of the week, including

local Suffolk-based dairy Marybelle and Peterborough-based independent dairy Meadow Foods.

Good breeding

"We've aimed to breed a cow that will last for about seven lactations, with at least 5.40% butterfat and 3.8% protein," explains Louise. "Good feet and legs are also a must, as is a good udder. If we're breeding for production, we need an udder that can hold all that milk."

For this reason, a mix of Danish and US sires has been used on the herd. Canadian Bull Meadowlawn Bright Spot was also a 'landmark' sire for the herd, as it was shortly after his introduction to the semen flask, back in the late 1970s, that yields really started to lift off the 4,500-litre mark. US bull A-nine Top Brass, the first American bull ever used in the UK, also had a significant effect on yield. His first daughters in the Upgate herd pushed production up to about 5,500kg. Another genetic boost was given to the herd in 1998 when 18 in-calf heifers, mostly by Fyn Danroy, were bought in from Denmark. These were purchased to

Golden girls: Jerseys have performed well on the Mahon's unit for the past 58 years





Pedigree stock: the herd performed well during a recent classification visit

replace some A-Nine daughters who were sold as BSE cohorts and, once they calved, Frank, Su and Louise saw butterfats soar to above 6% – a first for the herd.

“The North American and Danish sires compliment each other and are both key to the continued improvement of our herd,” explains Louise. “They helped us to continue to breed balanced cows which will perform and last. Danish sires are not so high on production, but are excellent on solids. The US bulls give us more volume, but less butterfat and protein.”

Louise says that the Danish sires are growing in popularity in the UK as a whole, partly due to health reasons. The Danes are very health conscious and the cattle are disease free.

They can also help to restore some of the constituents lost where higher-yielding US sires have been extensively used.

She’ll continue with the same breeding philosophy when she runs the heifer rearing enterprise.

“I want to breed heifers that will grow into cows that we would like to milk –

that’s what buyers will be looking for. So our breeding programme will remain the same. We’ll just use sexed semen to maximise heifer numbers.”

Impressive classification

An auctioneer from Wright Manley has visited the herd and was impressed by what he saw. Little wonder when you consider the results from a recent classification.

Three animals, including one bull, were classified EX and there were 12 VG, 21 Good plus and one Good. The final average score for the herd was 82.7. The rest of the herd are due to be classified before the sale.

Su says that who ever buys their cattle can look forward to managing healthy and efficient animals.

“It’s a fabulous breed – an aggressive feeder, intelligent, and easy to handle and calve.”

She adds that they’re interesting too. “They stop and question why they’re following the cow in front and they all have their own individual characters.”

Jerseys also suit Ugate Farm’s heavier land: “They won’t poach the gateways as quickly as heavier breeds and they’re great to look at.

“They’re not huge black-and-white hat racks. We never wanted to run a herd of any other breed.”

The family is apprehensive about the herd sale. “It’ll be tough to see the girls leave for Beeston Market. It’ll take some getting used to.

“I’ll miss the milking, but I won’t miss struggling with soggy weather and the cold, early starts,” says Frank.

Louise says she’ll miss the milkers too. But she is looking forward to focusing on the new heifer rearing enterprise.

“The plan at the moment is to rear heifers in groups of three or four and sell them privately.

“We have looked at contract rearing heifers for other producers, but we’ve always run a closed system from 2000 and have a high health status herd.

“It would be shame to jeopardise that, particularly when it came to selling our own heifers. So we’re still giving it some thought.”

“There’s no rush,” adds Su. “We can’t really make any major decisions until the milking herd has gone. Once we’ve cleared that hurdle and we’ll be ready for the next challenge.”

The Ugate herd will be sold at Beeston on November 1, 2013

The way they were: our previous article on the Ugate herd, published in 2003

Balanced breeding and a change in feeding has helped one Norfolk-based Jersey herd to top the NAMR annual production rankings. At Ugate Farm a mix of Canadian, US and Danish sires are used on the herd.

Over the top also for Jersey production in the UK, but a happy coincidence for the owners of the Norfolk-based Ugate Farm. Ugate Farm, near Framlingham, Suffolk, is the daughter of Louise Edwards, who is the third generation to run the farm. Louise says that the Danish sires and American sires are key to the continued improvement of our herd, but are excellent on solids. The US bulls give us more volume, but less butterfat and protein.”

Danish heifers have been used to improve the herd in 1996 when 18 cows were bought from Denmark. These were purchased to replace some A-Nine daughters who were sold as BSE cohorts and, once they calved, Frank, Su and Louise saw butterfats soar to above 6% – a first for the herd.

The North American and Danish sires complement each other and are both key to the continued improvement of our herd,” explains Louise. “They helped us to continue to breed balanced cows which will perform and last. Danish sires are not so high on production, but are excellent

had for the past year, particularly on the daughters of some of the American sires who are not so good on fat and protein. US sires currently in use include a Top 100 American – professionally a production bull – and another Canadian who is another exceptional production bull whose daughters are described by Louise as ‘solid’.

The herd’s increasing average yield is not all down to genetics – feeding also plays a key role. The herd average yield increased by 50kg in 2012 following the introduction of an automatic feeder in 2010, and heifer’s yield increased too.

“It used to take seven or eight months to round the herd’s feeding work for several years,” adds Frank who, with his 15, has been milking Jerseys for the past 30 years.

TAM feeding This winter the family switched to TAM Feeding, using a Kenner mixer wagon after a year of problems with one heifer at the end-of-parlour feeder.

“Not only were yields beginning to suffer, we were also seeing limited calves and the heifer cows getting rather fat,” says Su, adding that herd members have expanded by 20 head since the total parlour feeders were installed, which may have contributed to the problem.

Cows are now fed twice a day, at 08.00 and 16.00, and heifers are fed once a day at 08.00. The herd comprises 200 cows (100 Friesian, 100 Jersey), 100 calves and 200 adult heifers, plus 200 calves and 200 adult heifers, plus 200 calves and 200 adult heifers. They are managed on a 100-acre farm with a 100-acre CP concentrate in the parlour.

She had a moment in her April 2012 when she says: “We have to sell all we get some fairly the weather as we have not, heavy clay land here. This will help heifer retention well to there is plenty of grass to grow throughout the summer, unlike some other livestock farms in Norfolk,” says Su.

She had attention to detail also gives a key role in the herd’s success. “The cows come first here – we pay a lot of attention to detail because we have that successful management is not just about cows feeding, housing, milking and breeding. There’s a lot to it.”

Cow choice “There are 100 cows and a new herd is come out since when they used to be. Frank does the majority of the two daily milking and tries to have at least 10 hours as possible between them. “We don’t rush them through – we let them take their time,” he adds.

The cows there through the family’s pasture and grass cover approach with an average yield of cows that 2,000kg with 60% of heifer and protein – a figure which saw the herd relative to first place in 2008 annual production rankings this year.

“We’ve been number one before, but we’ve been number one for just 20 years of heifer and protein,” explains Louise, who is keen to stress once again that being top of the pile is neither here, nor her parent’s ultimate aim.

Instead they simply enjoy milking a healthy and productive Jersey herd. “We’re Jersey people and we don’t want to switch to other,” says Su. “It’s a different breed – an aggressive feeder, intelligent, and easy to handle and calve.”

To add that some of their cows are very adept at opening gates and climbing things. “We’ve had other breeds of cows, they’ll stop and question why they’re following the cow in front.”

Louise also says Ugate Farm’s heifer herd is “the best” in the parlour as quickly as heifer breeds and they’re good to look at. “They’re the pattern in and white but black. We wouldn’t want to see a herd of any other breed.”

Rachel Pater

"We are Jersey people"

Solids or volume — why not both?